

# NEW KNOWLEDGE about Germany

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Germany.  
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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## ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN GERMANY

Germany's 'economic miracle' of the 1960s triggered significant immigration from southern Europe, Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia. Through well-organised government agreements between Germany and these countries of origin, Germany's guest workers were expected to come and contribute to the country's economic reconstruction, and eventually return to their countries of origin. However, the 'Gasterbeiters' stayed, brought their families, and changed Germany's demography. Ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality has thus been a reality of Germany for many decades now, even though there has been a much delayed recognition of this reality. In effect, it was not until 2000 that public policies acknowledged the status of Germany as a country of immigration. Citizenship laws were considerably changed and enabled children of immigrants born in the country, to acquire German citizenship under certain circumstances.

However, the dominant perception that links German nationality to ethnic origin has not completely changed, whether in public opinion or in politics. As a result, immigrants and their descendants are still considered as 'outsiders' by the large majority on the basis of appearance, name, and increasingly, religion. Being a German citizen does not necessarily mean being accepted as one, and this is particularly the case for immigrants and their descendants from Turkey or Arab countries.

As has been the case across Europe over the past couple of decades, there have been numerous debates in the public sphere on the role of Islam in German society and in particular on the visibility of Muslim religious practices such as religious dress and of sites of worship (mosques).

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in two very important areas: education and political life:

- We examined the accommodation of religious diversity, and in particular the **religious neutrality of the state**;
- We focused on **Muslim religious education** in schools in order to discern different understandings of neutrality and tolerance; and
- We studied **public debates on Muslim integration and the impact of intolerant discourses**.

### Evaluation of discourses and practices in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
Religious practice in school (prayer)	Recognition by the law, not by all courts	Between tolerance and intolerance	Partly recognition but rather intolerance
Muslim religious education in public schools	Recognition by the law, not by all courts	Between tolerance and recognition with incidents of intolerance	Suspicion but partly acknowledgement of necessity (tolerance)
Intolerant discourse about Muslims	Recognition (incitement to hatred is sanctioned) by the law, but rarely applied	Largely leaning towards intolerance, as intolerant discourse is rarely sanctioned	Between recognition and intolerance, leaning towards intolerance

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND NEUTRALITY IN SCHOOLS

The relationship between the state and religion is framed quite differently in every European country, thereby shaping laws, politics and practice in particular ways in each national case. Religious neutrality of the state is extremely relevant in the public school system, where dependent minors are confronted with state representatives in very direct and dependent power-relations. We therefore examined the German Federal State's religious neutrality in order to discern different understandings of neutrality and tolerance.

In 2009, a 16-year old Muslim boy, who was forbidden to perform his ritual prayer at a public school in Berlin went to court in order to secure it. We examined this case in order to identify the ways in which the state's religious neutrality is understood by the different actors. Those who were in favour of the boy's appeal held the view that the state itself had to be neutral on religious issues and could not lean towards one or another religion. However, neutrality implied that religions ought to be supported in their public expressions. They thus perceived the boy's prayer as falling under religious freedom and as such as was his unalienable basic right. Those who opposed his appeal mostly expressed a rather laic understanding of state neutrality, one that restricts religious expression to the private sphere and does not tolerate it in public places like schools.

Those favouring a 'positive' understanding of state neutrality (i.e. one that supports the expression of religious groups), also **understood tolerance in the sense of respect** than of 'allowance.' They tended to support diverse religious expressions in public as an opportunity to teach tolerance and respect. Those who favoured a rather laic understanding of the state, spoke of **tolerance as allowance**. They were often concerned that **if granted 'too freely' to 'the wrong ones', this kind of tolerance could endanger public peace.**

## MUSLIM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PUBLICSCHOOLS

In Germany, education falls within the remit of federal states' autonomy. Therefore, the issue of Islamic religious education in public schools is dealt with differently in every federal state. Most have acknowledged the necessity of teaching Islamic religion in public schools but have difficulties with putting it into practice.

Muslim organisations are not officially acknowledged as public corporations (Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts). This creates a practical problem as the state lacks an official partner that is able to represent the Muslim community and with whom it could organise the structure

and format of Muslim religious education. The law however requires such a partner, as the content of the religious education has to be determined by the religious organisation itself and not by the state. Thus, in order for Muslim organisations to be able to play this role, it is necessary that they be recognised as public corporations and attributed equal rights.

For historical reasons, Berlin has a slightly different legal situation and one Muslim organisation gained the right to teach at public schools about 10 years ago, after a two-decade long court battle. Looking at this specific experience we found that the teaching of this organisation is generally appreciated by many Muslim parents and pupils, but the schools and teachers are still polarised on the issue. **While some welcome the Muslim teachers as mediators in moments of conflict, others consider them as problematic and try to keep them in marginal positions in school leading in fact to some Muslim teachers feeling stigmatised by some of their colleagues.**

From the interviews we conducted, we concluded that the introduction of Islamic religious education is important because it has the potential of being a **strong tool of fostering mutual tolerance, acceptance and respect within a religiously and ethnically diverse school setting**. In order for the school to benefit from this potential it should however be supported by the different actors in the school setting and the society at large in order to avoid the stigmatisation and marginalisation of teachers and also the Muslim pupils and parents. A constant and lively communication between the Muslim teachers and the rest of the school staff seems to be essential for avoiding misunderstandings and intolerant attitudes and behaviours.

## INTOLERANT DISCOURSES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In order to understand the growing anti-Muslim attitude in the German public opinion and its effects on members of the targeted minority we analysed the public debate that was triggered by the book *“Germany does away with itself”* written by the social democrat Thilo Sarrazin in 2010. In this book, Sarrazin polemicises against Muslim immigrants as being unwilling and even unable to integrate into German society. In a rather explicitly racist manner he attributes a lower level of intelligence to Muslim immigrant groups and blames them for having more children than the non-Muslim majority. These arguments were initially received with shock in the public sphere, but the racist dimension was rather quickly disregarded as the substance of the public debate turned to the challenges of immigrant integration, and in particular Muslim immigrant integration.

Through our research, we were led to the conclusion that it was not Sarrazin’s book as such that concerned many Muslims in Germany, but rather the fact that his ideas were not outright rejected by the mainstream political forces and were largely endorsed by public opinion at large. **Instead of criticizing Sarrazin’s intolerant and even racist ideas, the blame was rather turned against the victims by debating the ability of Muslims to integrate into German society.** These developments gave many Muslims an impression of being unwelcome in Germany due to their religious affiliation and in part their ethnic origin. This had a two-fold effect on politically and socially active German Muslim citizens. **Some of our interviewees withdrew from their activities in reaction to the debate, while others became even more active in order to change the intolerant attitudes and the perception of marginalisation of Muslims.**

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rather than forcefully limiting religious expression to the private sphere or favouring one (often the Christian) religion over others, our empirical findings lead us to recommend that policy makers and legal professionals strengthen the neutrality of the state towards all religions, and support them all equally. The initial idea of the law of state neutrality – to protect the citizens from the power and interference of the state, rather than the other way round – would thus be strengthened and religious freedom, a fundamental human right, would be further secured.

Regarding the specific issue of Muslim prayer at public schools, we recommend the **establishment of a neutral room for prayer and all other kinds of retreat and meditation**. Such a room of worship would not include any specific religious symbols and could be used by pupils of all religious denominations alike as also by those without religion. This solution would be perfectly **compatible with the religious neutrality of the state and at the same time, it would grant freedom of religious expression and practice for all pupils**.

The introduction of Islamic religious education in public schools should be accompanied by a **constant process of communication** between all members of the school and the respective Islamic teachers in order to address potential misunderstandings and weaken mutually existing stereotypes.

At the national and federal state level, the process of acknowledging Muslim organisations as public corporations (Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts) needs to be enhanced in order to establish a partnership similar to the one enjoyed by Christian Churches.

**Growing racism in mainstream society should be acknowledged as a problem by politics and debates about it and policies to struggle against it should urgently be considered.**

Anti-discrimination offices should explore efficient ways to counter individual stereotyping and discrimination of both Muslim pupils and teachers within the educational setting.

In addition, initiating public debates about the opportunities and potential that is offered by diverse societies is more constructive to pretending to maintain a homogeneity that is long gone and that probably never existed as such. In order to secure public peace, open expression of intolerance and racism should be named as such and should be officially sanctioned.

## FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

**Tolerance Discourses in Germany: How Muslims are Constructed as National Others**

By Nina Mühe (Europe – University Viadrina)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/23404>

Other relevant publications include:

**2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe**

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

	PROJECT IDENTITY
<b>Acronym</b>	<b>ACCEPT PLURALISM</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe</b>
<b>Short Description</b>	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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<b>Web site</b>	<a href="http://www.accept-pluralism.eu">www.accept-pluralism.eu</a>
<b>Duration</b>	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
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<b>Consortium</b>	17 partners (15 countries)
<b>Coordinator</b>	European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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